

Hall's Legislation Would Increase Access to Treatment and Benefits for Veterans Suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress

Disorder *Montrose, NY* – Standing with three generations of veterans who have suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) during National Salute to Hospitalized Veterans Week, U.S. Rep. John Hall (D-Dover Plains) announced major legislation to make it easier for veterans with PTSD to receive disability benefits and treatment. Hall will be traveling to Washington, DC later today to introduce the legislation in the U.S. House of Representatives.

After visiting with veterans at the U.S. Veterans Hospitals at both Montrose and Castle Point, Congressman Hall announced legislation he has written called the COMBAT PTSD Act: Compensation Owed for Mental Health Based on Activities in Theater. The legislation will remove the onus from any veteran diagnosed with PTSD to have to prove that a specific incident during combat caused his or her PTSD. Hall's COMBAT PTSD Act will make it so that any veteran diagnosed with PTSD who served in combat will automatically have the ability to get treatment and benefits for the service injury of PTSD.

"The stories I have heard from veterans who return home from war overcome with PTSD only to fight another war with the VA to get the help they need are heartbreaking," said Congressman Hall. "America's veterans are facing record deployments, record debt, record depression, and record suicides. Last month we lost more soldiers to suicide than we did to Al Qaeda. We must change the way we treat veterans and soldiers with PTSD and we must recognize PTSD as a disabling war injury."

From Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts alone, over 100,000 veterans have been diagnosed with PTSD. Tragically, however, only 42,000 have been granted service-connected disability for their condition. The disability claims backlog at the Veterans Administration (VA) tops 800,000. Most of these claims are Vietnam Veterans seeking compensation for PTSD.

The VA's current policy forces veterans to "prove" that a specific stressor during a war triggered their PTSD, even if they have already been diagnosed and been receiving treatment for the condition. Veterans must track down incident reports, buddy statements, present medals, and leap other hurdles to validate to the VA that their PTSD was a result from their war service.

"The current policy violates common sense," stated Hall. "A soldier who does not have PTSD before entering a war, who returns home from war with PTSD, should not have to prove that his PTSD is a result of a specific experience during war. Simply serving in combat can induce PTSD. The wars America is fighting right now have no front or rear lines. Danger can strike in any place, anywhere. It is clear that the current regulations are in need of change."

David Tracy of Peekskill, a 23-year old Marine veteran of the Iraq War stated that he began experiencing PTSD symptoms while still in Iraq and then having the worst of the symptoms hit when he returned home: anxiety, sleeplessness, guilt, and panic episodes with flash backs. With tours in both Fallujah and Baghdad, Tracy saw significant combat. He was hit by several Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and was awarded a Purple Heart. "I never knew when the next IED would hit, but when you're there you just keep doing what you're supposed to do," stated Mr. Tracy. Th

e COMBAT PTSD Act lowers the burdensome threshold that veterans have to meet to receive compensation. The bill expands the legal definition of 'combat with the enemy' to establish that service during combat is enough of a stressor to be the cause of PTSD. The veteran would still need to be clinically diagnosed with PTSD in order to receive benefits. However, he or she would no longer be forced to "prove" specific events occurred that caused this diagnosis.

World War II Army Air Corps veteran Norman Bussel of Mohegan Lake told his story of being shot down on April 29, 1944 over Berlin and losing four of his crew mates. He landed in the suburbs of Berlin, was captured by civilians and was in the process of being hanged when he was rescued by a German soldier on a motorcycle. He was taken prisoner and spent one year in a POW camp. He was liberated on April 29, 1945 by General Patton's troops, and eventually returned home.

"No one comes home from combat without emotional baggage," said Mr. Bussel. "You can't go through this experience without psychological damage; PTSD is with you forever. There can be vast improvement if the veteran seeks counsel and treatment. In my mind, Congressman Hall's legislation falls under the category of a presumptive for PTSD that is similar to a presumptive for POWs and that is a great and deserved benefit."

Ed Grigas of Amawalk, a proud combat veteran of the Vietnam War, had to fight the VA for five years to get recognition of his PTSD. Serving as a combat engineer, responsible for base camp security from 1970 -1971 Long Binh and Binh he watched helplessly as his comrades were mortally wounded and he lost several close friends. Mr. Grigas requested compensation from the VA for a variety of physical problems and PTSD, but was denied the PTSD compensation. In 2003 he asked the Disabled American Veterans for help with his claim, and the DAV pursued an appeal. After waiting years for an answer on his VA appeal, Mr. Grigas finally contacted the District Office of Congressman John Hall. The Congressman's office made inquiry to the Appeals Management Center, and the claim was expedited. The Appeals Team of the VA retrieved more evidence of Mr. Grigas' combat experiences and his PTSD claim was awarded this past December.

"This claim took over five years from 2003-2008, and it wasn't until I contacted the Congressman's office that things started happening for me," said Mr. Grigas.

"Just as our military adapts and reforms its strategies in every war it fights, so must the VA to reform its strategies to help the surviving heroes of those wars," stated Hall. "Our veterans need every ounce of assistance that we can provide, and they certainly don't need to fight to get it."

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